

# EFL and Educational Reform: Content-based Interaction in Argentina

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Content-based instruction, or the use of subject matter for language teaching purposes, has been implemented in a variety of ESL and EFL teaching settings. The approach takes many different forms and often requires rethinking of current practices in areas such as syllabus design, materials selection, teacher training, and assessment. (Footnote 1 below) It presents particular challenges in settings where teachers are accustomed to traditional approaches to language teaching. In this article, we describe some initial experiences with content-based instruction.

## **Brief Background**

Teachers in Argentina waited many years for a law which could outline a curriculum meant to fit the modern world. The new Federal Law of Education (Ley Federal de Educación) was finally established in March 1997.(Footnote 2 below) Broadly speaking, the law divides schooling into three main stages or cycles: Initial Education (Educación Inicial), EGB (Educación Genreal Básica-General Basic Education) and Multi-track Education (Educación Polimodal). (Footnote 3 below) The actual number of years of schooling has remained the same; the organization and labels have changed. The importance of the law lies in the fact that for the first time in the history of the country, the Ministry of Education of each province and the federal government collaborated to create an organizational device that could provide a curriculum for the entire country. The Initial cycle consists of three years (ages 3 to 5) with only the last year mandatory (see Figure 1). EGB is made up of three cycles: first, second, and third, each of them three years long. Multi-track Education consists of three years. The new curriculum increases mandatory education from seven to ten years.

The law establishes that foreign languages will be taught from the second cycle of EGB, English being one of the possibilities throughout the EGB, but mandatory the first year of Multi-track Education. The focus of the new English curriculum is on communicative competence. The content to be covered has been divided into three categories: Procedural, Attitudinal, and Cross-Curricular. The Procedural content refers to the "how to" of language: skills, processes, strategies, and methods. The Attitudinal content refers to the set of rules, values, virtues, and attitudes, both personal and social, that will underlie all the activities in the English classroom. Cross-Curricular content refers to topics or themes that do not belong to any special discipline but reflect the whole of the National Curriculum.

Taking into account all the provisions indicated in the new law, teachers in Argentina are facing a great challenge-turning theory into practice. We believe that a content-based approach provides an excellent means by which to cover such a wide spectrum of requirements deriving from the new education law. To implement the new Federal Law of Education will be a difficult task for

most schools in Argentina. Lack of information, insufficient time to become acquainted with the new requirements and to train teachers, ongoing changes (the law has already been modified twice in a couple of months), and the shortage and lack of resources will no doubt hamper implementation.

## **An Elementary School Example: Escuela de los Padres**

In one school, Escuela de los Padres, the prospects for change look very bright. The school is located in Venado Tuerto, a town in the south of the province of Santa Fe, about 380 km from Buenos Aires, the capital city. The school board is made up of students' parents who decide on administrative matters, whereas the academic and pedagogic issues are in the hands of the department heads. The English program was born to satisfy the demands of the community: English is viewed as the international language for communication and in most cases as the key for professional success. The program of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Escuela de los Padres has 202 students, their ages ranging from 3 to 12. Classes are usually made up of 20 students. Three- and four-year olds start with half an hour a day of EFL instruction. When they turn five, the number of hours is increased to six per week as a transition to elementary school where all grades have two hours and a half of EFL instruction from Monday to Thursday. (The fifth, sixth, and seventh grades have English classes on Friday: history, geography, and science.) Literature is integrated in all other syllabuses, especially in language. Students attend the mainstream in Spanish in the morning and their English classes in the afternoon.

Two years ago, when I started working in the school, content was already part of the school curriculum as of third grade.(Footnote 4 below) Having content as a component of the school curriculum was a good start, but it did not go far enough. Teachers believed that content instruction resulted in greater gains for students and thus, they made great efforts to use it. Yet sometimes this instruction was reduced to teachers' lectures and students' memorization of lessons from a textbook. The program lacked a coherent syllabus and there was some overlap in the topics covered in the different grades. In addition, communication between English and Spanish teachers was practically nonexistent. Last, but not least, the syllabus for lower grades (kindergarten, first, and second grades) needed to be revised towards a more integrated approach to language and content. Therefore, with the invaluable help of our advisor, Ms. de la Vega, we thought out a scheme to start working on these issues.

Last year was solely devoted to the implementation of an inservice teacher training program. Workshops were conducted on a monthly basis. These aimed at familiarizing teachers with the new thinking and developments in integrated language and content instruction and at providing teachers with a solid grounding in the language arts. By developing the language arts, students also develop the tools they need throughout the curriculum and their life-long learning. Informal feedback-after-class observations provided me with many useful opportunities to go over certain points teachers were not sure about and to become more sensitized to their concerns and needs. Teacher "buy-in" was immediate. All of them were very enthusiastic about the project and were responsive to comments and suggestions. Theory was put into practice, not only in the language classes, but in the content classes as well. The school board was also very supportive; in fact, a

monthly allowance was granted to me to provide teachers with the necessary resources: tape-recorders, books, cassettes, videos, etc.

This year the focus is mainly on content. Our main objectives are to start introducing content-based instruction as of kindergarten and to develop a content-based curriculum that meets the requirements of the new law. The introduction of children's literature in kindergarten is our first step towards a more content-oriented syllabus with young learners. Simple but authentic stories have opened up endless possibilities to use English in contexts that are both meaningful and attractive to our children.

In regards to the new curriculum, we are trying to find a balance between the content syllabuses teachers have been using so far, the subject matter dealt with in Spanish, and the requirements of the new law. The approach for selecting and sequencing topics in the new law is spiral; that is, the main topics are the same, but the level of difficulty changes and the sub-topics become more detailed and suited to the students' linguistic, developmental, and intellectual levels. To make the topics even more relevant and appealing, we are trying to choose new, interesting information that complements what the students have studied in Spanish. Our objective, however, is not to focus only on what they already know, but also to explore other related topics. Hands-on experiments in natural sciences and surveys, interviews, and research in social studies provide students with excellent opportunities for meaningful content-based instruction in English.

Next year our goal is to start reducing the number of hours devoted to language teaching per se and to increase the number of hours devoted to content instruction in English.(Footnote 5 below) The project is ambitious. Yet we are convinced that the combination of language and content is a very powerful tool to make our EFL program a more challenging and profitable experience for students, teachers, and administrators. We are all fully committed to this goal.

## **A Secondary School Example: Colegio de Asis**

As the new Federal Law of Education has just been put into practice in Argentina, there are many issues that teachers, especially those teaching in the last level of EGB or in the Multi-track cycle, still have to consider. Many teachers argue that the use of language for communication is still very limited and very limiting. There are many schools in the provinces or in different areas of the big cities, where changing the approach towards a more communicative one may be a formidable challenge as teachers have to deal with numerous problems both inside and outside the classroom (for example, more than 40 students in a class, lack of materials, poor student motivation, too many teaching hours, low salaries) to feel comfortable with implementing such a sudden change.

However, some public and private schools, in Buenos Aires and in other urban areas in Argentina have to face a different type of problem. This is the case of the Colegio de Asis, among many others. Here, classes have always been small and students with the same English proficiency have been grouped since the beginning of secondary school. We have been working with a communicative approach for many years. At first, the new curriculum seemed to bring nothing new to us, but we soon discovered that it mandated that English had to share certain

themes with other subjects-natural sciences, social sciences, technology, arts, and ethics-as part of the movement towards a more integrated curriculum. We then decided that this could be the chance we needed to add more content to our classes. Up to now, content had been an excuse to teach language in a more contextualized, pseudo-realistic way. We decided that if we could find connections with other points in the curriculum, content could become more prominent in our classes. We hoped this would raise motivation as language would then become a means to learn content, which we thought would surely enhance our English classes.

The process towards content-based English instruction has not been simple. First we tried to look for topics which could have points of contact with other subjects in the curriculum within the syllabuses of the current English courses. The result was nonexistent: Most of the EFL materials used at the school dealt with a few topics in basic communicative language, but there was no really academic material at all. Finally we thought the best thing to do was to start exactly the other way around, by asking content teachers what things they would be interested in sharing, what themes, topics and/or materials they thought students could deal with or get information from in their English classes.

We did not think this task was going to be so hard. The first step we took consisted of asking our content colleagues in the teachers' room what content they would like us to cover in our classes. We explained to them that our idea was to make thematic units based on the topics they suggested and use materials they could provide or they thought would be interesting for our students to work with.

At the beginning, content teachers were not very enthusiastic about working with us. Maybe they did not want to share with us or they thought that this would add more work to the busy school schedules. It is also important to point out that teachers of English have traditionally been looked down on in Argentina, mainly because they are very innovative and generally up-to-date professionally. This reaction led us to get in touch with the school director and the academic board, who have always been in favor of integrating the different areas in the curriculum. The authorities of the school thought that the idea of including more content in the English classes was very interesting, so they decided to organize several meetings with the heads of the different departments, and the project finally started to grow. We then worked with some of the subjects suggested by the content teachers and developed thematic units accordingly. Those fortunate teachers who found a content teacher willing to share knowledge and resources with them started to work on the new task of creating thematic units that would exploit content and language. Some other teachers who were not so lucky are still waiting for their content teacher colleagues to make up their minds and join them in this new endeavor. Starting gradually, teachers plan to add more content to their English classes in order to help students develop study skills and more sophisticated strategies that could help them succeed in their future academic studies. The complex issue of assessment in this new content-based approach is also being discussed.

We know that the road towards content-based instruction will take us in many directions and it is, perhaps, too soon to speak about results. At the outset, however, we have seen a marked rise in students' as well as teachers' motivation. The road ahead may be long, but it is good to know that we have taken the first steps.

## Conclusion

As we undergo these educational changes in Argentina, it is important to point out that the dramatic shift from a traditional grammar-oriented approach towards a communicative approach that also takes into consideration the acquisition of academic skills and the use of language as a tool for learning content may become overwhelming for most teachers. This is especially true in light of the fact that the majority of the teachers have not undergone the kind of training required to make a positive change out of these innovations. Even though these changes were meant to be gradual, implementation has already started and may find most teachers willing but unprepared. On the positive side, we believe that the current educational reform in Argentina will provide an impetus towards content-based instruction in settings where more traditional approaches have remained strong and greater support in schools where teachers are already committed to integrated instruction. All in all, Argentine schools face a remarkable opportunity to conform to the federal mandates and develop an EFL curriculum that is in keeping with one of the latest trends in English language teaching worldwide.

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## References

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## Footnote 1

1. See Mohan (1986) for a discussion of the theoretical rationale and Snow and Brinton (1997) for a comprehensive treatment of issues in content-based instruction.

## **Footnote 2**

2. The new law is contained in the document "Programa de Asistencia Tecnica para las Transformacion Curricular," Ministerio de Cultura y Educacion de la Nacion Argentina, 1996.

## **Footnote 3**

3. We decided to coin this word to reflect the fact that this cycle allows students to choose among several technical and professional tracks. The tracks are: Socio-humanistic, Administration, Art, Industry and Agronomy, Environment, and Health.

## **Footnote 4**

4. All through the article we use the word grade when we talk about primary school to avoid confusion, but, since the law has not been fully implemented, some are called years and some are called grades.

## **Footnote 5**

5. A way to achieve this is to start delivering English classes on Fridays to all grades. Since this change may bring about some resistance from parents and administrative problems as well, it will be carried out gradually, starting next year with 4th grade only.